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Indice

Sezioni speciali

Visioni del Sud, visioni dal Sud: il Mezzogiorno e il Mediterraneo come costruzioni discorsive

Sessione presentata al Convegno AATI (American Association of Teachers
of Italian), Cagliari 20-25 giugno 2018

- DIEGO STEFANELLI: La Sardegna dei linguisti e la Sardegna per i turisti:
consonanze e dissonanze discorsive a inizio Novecento 10
- MARIO CIMINI: La novella *Libertà* di Verga e la demitizzazione della retorica
risorgimentale 30
- ANTONIO FONTANA: Gramsci and the South as a Space of Emancipation 39

Miti e leggende nella letteratura e nel cinema d'ambientazione sarda

Sessione presentata al Convegno AATI (American Association of Teachers
of Italian), Cagliari 20-25 giugno 2018

- MYRIAM MEREU: *Cogas, janas* e le altre: le creature mitiche e fantastiche nella
letteratura e nel cinema sardi 56
- GISELLA MURGIA: Sardegna tra leggenda e realtà: 'Sa femmina accabadora' nelle
immagini e nelle parole di alcuni autori sardi 77
- BERNADETTE LUCIANO: "The Last Mother": From Enrico Pau's *L'accabadora*
(2015) to Valeria Golino's *Miele* (2013) 85

Articoli - Articles

- TANCREDI ARTICO: Per una grammatica del sogno nel «Decameron». Forme e
strutture delle novelle a tema onirico 96

GLORIA CAMESASCA: «Trista è tal arte e tristo quel che spende / tutto il suo tempo in opra così vile»: edizione critica e commento dell' <i>Alfabeto de' giuocatori</i> di Giulio Cesare Croce	110
GIOVANNI DE LEVA: Monicelli e la memoria della Grande Guerra	125
MARCO GIANI: Ondina e le ondine. Questioni di raffigurazione (verbale e iconografica) della donna sportiva nell'Italia fascista (1933 ca.)	140
CHIEL MONZONE: Traduzioni <i>belles infidèles</i> . Commenti a quelle dei componimenti lubrici di Domenico Tempio	161
BÁLINT TAKÁCS: Prigionieri di guerra ungheresi all'Aquila (1915-1919)	183
ALESSANDRA TREVISAN: Goliarda Sapienza atipica "giornalista militante"	198

Recensioni

ALESSANDRA DINO, <i>A colloquio con Gaspare Spatuzza. Un racconto di vita, una storia di stragi</i> , Bologna, il Mulino, 2016 (Gergely Bohács)	216
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The Last Mother: From Enrico Pau's *L'accabadora* (2015) to Valeria Golino's *Miele* (2013)

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Abstract: *L'accabadora* is a Sardinian term deriving from the Spanish word 'acabar' which means to finish or complete. It refers to a female figure in Sardinian popular tradition, 'the last mother', an angel of mercy who assists the terminally ill in leaving the world. In this paper I explore variations of this female figure in two contemporary films. Enrico Pau's film *L'accabadora* set in pre- and World War II Sardinia, revolves around a protagonist (Annetta) who is a direct descendant of this Sardinian tradition. The second film, Valerio Golino's *Miele*, proposes what might be considered a contemporary variant of the Sardinian folk figure. While the tabu subject of euthanasia certainly forms the backdrop to the films, what is foregrounded is the isolation and alienation of the female protagonists who carry out care-giving roles tied to death. Torn between the conviction that the tasks they perform as "last mothers" console or provide final moments of serenity to the dying and an intangible discomfort with their execution of the task, they remain seemingly haunted by their roles, exhibiting an unease that arises from societal discomfort with administering death and a profession that requires that they direct their care to the dying rather than to the living. The representation of the films' protagonists, their framing and the construction of the journeys they undertake, turn both films into narratives of self-discovery, motivated by encounters with others and otherness, and visually configured by the physical mobility across transformed geo-political landscapes that is central to the films.

1. Introduction

Il diritto di morire/The Right to Die is the title of noted writer and intellectual Daria Maraini's latest book, a conversation with legal expert Claudio Volpe.¹ As the premise of the book suggests, while the world is rapidly changing, and technology is transforming our everyday lives, certain laws and morals are struggling to keep up the pace. Certain themes and questions require reflection and this conversation with Volpe addresses one of the pressing issues of our times, that of end of life and of an individual's right to die. *Il diritto di morire* reinvigorates many of the controversial legal and bioethical debates on euthanasia and assisted suicide

¹ D. Maraini, C. Volpe, *Il diritto di morire*, Milano, Società Editrice Milanese, 2018.

that involve public policy, the legal system, and religious institutions as well as the health care professions.² In the nineteenth century, advances in medicine that meant access to painless rather than violent forms of death spurred the euthanasia ethical discussion. The added potential of twentieth century medical practice to prolong life through technological means provoked additional debates on what courses of action should be available to the physician and the family in cases of extreme physical or emotional suffering. Philosophical and ethical discussions on dignity, autonomy and the right of self-determination fueled debates an individual's right to accept or reject medical treatment and the right of a patient to decide when, where, how and why to die.

Not surprisingly, cinema has located right to die issues at the center of its narratives, often drawing from real-life events. These narratives have broached the issues from a range of perspectives and cinematic genres, from legal dramas that have positioned the perpetrator as protagonist such as Michael Gordon's *An Act of Murder* (1948) where a tough judge Calvin Cooke faces a moral quandary when his wife develops brain cancer to Barry Levinson's *You Don't Know Jack* (2010) a biopic about doctor Jack Kevorkian. Other recent films such as Clint Eastwood's Hollywood blockbuster *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and Alejandro Amenábar's *Mar adentro/The Sea Inside* (2004), the life story of Ramón Sampedro, a quadriplegic who fought for nearly thirty years to end his life with dignity, complicate the debate as life altering disability and choices about quality of life enter the picture alongside terminal illness.

In addition to fictional renditions, small budget independent documentaries such as Peter Richardson's Grand Jury Award Sundance Film Festival winner, *How To Die in Oregon* (2011) contain actual footage of an assisted suicide through an intimate personalized account that focuses on what is the most universal distinction of being human - the difference between life and death. Whether fiction or documentary, narratives have generally placed an intimate relationship at the center of the drama, such as an ailing person asking somebody close to them for help or recently films featuring elderly couples entering into an assisted death or suicide pact, as is the case of films such as Michael Haneke's Palm D'Or film *Amour* (2012), and two films presented at the 2017 Venice Film Festival Paolo Virzi's the *Leisure Seeker* and Robert Guediguian's *La Villa/The House by the Sea*. The viewer is drawn intimately, almost voyeuristically into a family story, that tends to link the act of assisted suicide to a compassionate act that honors the dying persons wishes, allots them dignity, and is positioned as an ultimate act of love.

² In my discussion I do not explore the acknowledged distinction between voluntary and involuntary euthanasia and assisted suicide, as I am focussing more broadly on the notion of assisted death and the right to die. For a definition of the terms see D. Harris, B. Richard, and P. Khanna, *Assisted dying: the ongoing debate*, «Postgraduate Medical Journal», 82 (970) 2006, pp. 479-482.

In Italy, films dealing with euthanasia or assisted suicide are unusual, as these remain tabu topics that have actively been repressed by both the Church and political institutions. The Church denounces euthanasia and bills introduced into the Italian legislature have for a variety of reasons never made it to the floor of parliament for debate. As a result, euthanasia and assisted suicide of any kind are punishable under articles 575, 579, and 580 of the Italian Penal Code.³ Public discussion has been fuelled primarily by media accounts which have highlighted cases such as those of prominent figures who have taken their own lives as a result of illness (such as Mario Monicelli's leap from his hospital window in 2010, which is I believe indirectly referenced in *Miele*, and more recently director Carlo Lizzani's suicide) or cases that have attracted media attention such as Eluana Englaro, a woman who died in February 2009 after having been in a coma for nearly seventeen years and whose story became the impetus for Marco Bellocchio's 2012 film *Bella Addormentata/Dormant Beauty*. Her father's decision to remove her feeding tube and allow her to die was supported by the Italian courts and opposed by the Vatican and the prime minister at the time, Silvio Berlusconi. Englaro's fate became the subject of a furious and divisive national debate.

In this article I am focusing on two recent films, the 2015 film *L'accabadora* by Enrico Pau, and Valeria Golino's 2013 film, *Miele/Honey*. Pau's film set in World War II Sardinia, revolves around a protagonist, Annetta, who belongs to this Sardinian tradition, a legendary community figure called upon to perform an end of life ritual in the rural setting of a Sardinian village. Valeria Golino's *Miele* proposes what might be considered a contemporary variant of the Sardinian folk figure, an unrooted medical school dropout who has the knowledge, skill and courage to assist patients in ending their lives based on doctors' assessment of their illness. She is a mobile free agent hired by the medical profession, working in many different cities and accepting payment for what she does. I will argue that while these two films clearly bring the debates relevant to assisted dying into a public space, they do so within the context of a feminist politics of care that distances them from taking a position on the right to die issue, focusing instead on a relational and affective engagement that becomes a political act.

Care, as Howard Curzer argues, is an essential part of being a citizen and can help us recognize and respond to the needs of others.⁴ In its enactment, care is necessary to the fabric of biological and social existence. In Carol Gilligan's seminal text *In a Different Voice*, care is configured as a female, relational approach to eth-

³ <https://www.donnamoderna.com/news/in-primo-piano/testamento-biologico-biotestamento-eutanasia-svizzera> (09/09/2018)

⁴ H. Cruzler, *Aristotle: Founder of the Ethics of Care*, «The Journal of Value Enquiry», 41 2007, pp. 221-243.

ics where attachment and compassion take precedence over impartiality and rights that define a justice based approach.⁵ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa asserts that care is active: it is a practice, an enactment, a doing based upon creating a relation.⁶ In both films discussed in this essay, the protagonists function in the role of caregivers, or “last mothers” who establish a relationship with the object of their care. In the final moments of life, they engage in practice of care, a situation ethics that purports that one does what the “loving” thing is to do in a given situation. While on the one level the films can be seen to highlight the gritty questions in the debate on assisted suicide, they do so in a context that foregrounds the isolation and alienation of the female protagonists who carry out care-giving roles tied to death. Torn between the conviction that the tasks they perform as “last mothers” console or provide final moments of serenity to the dying and an intangible discomfort with their execution of the task, they remain seemingly haunted by their roles, exhibiting an unease that arises from societal discomfort with administering death and a profession that requires that they direct their care to the dying rather than to the living. The representation of the films’ protagonists, their framing and the construction of the journeys they undertake, turn both films into narratives of self-discovery, motivated by encounters with others and otherness, and visually configured by the physical mobility across transformed geo-political landscapes that is central to the films.

2. *L'accabadora*

Accabadora is a Sardinian term deriving from the Spanish verb *acabar* which means to finish or complete – the Sardinian verb *accabare/accabai* has the same meaning. It refers to an elderly female figure in Sardinian popular tradition, whose historicity has been much contested but for whom there seems to be anthropological as well as anecdotal evidence. Most recently the Sardinian figure of the *accabadora* has gained prominence through Michaela Murgia’s award winning 2009 novel of the same name (unrelated to the film). The *accabadora* has been referred to as a practical female figure or care-giver able to assist in birthing, in curing injuries, or in delivering death to those who no longer have hope to live. Vested with the authority to decide whether to perform the act of ‘la buona morte’ or the good death, *l'accabadora* was called upon only as a last resort, to liberate the soul from a suffering body languishing in a prolonged state of agony, ultimately performing an act of love for the dying person, the family and the community.

⁵ C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁶ M. Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘*Nothing Comes Without Its World*’: *Thinking with Care*, «The Sociological Review», 60 (2) 2012, pp. 197-216.

The ritual that the *accabadora* would supposedly follow included ridding the room and the dying person of any sacred object and the family members would be asked to leave the room. The *accabadora* would then either suffocate the ill person with a pillow, or strike them on the forehead or neck with a wooden club (from an olive tree), known as *mazzolu*. While there are some claims that the figure is purely mythical, there are numerous historical testimonials which claim to have borne witness to the figure of the *accabadora* and her practices. One such testimony was the basis for Dolores Turchi's book *Ho visto agire s'accabadora*, which was one of the sources for Michela Murgia's book, and a work by Alessandro Bucarelli, a doctor and criminal anthropologist at the University of Sassari, who has studied and published extensively on the *accabadora* and is one of the source's for Pau's film.⁷

Enrico Pau's 2015 film stars Donatella Finocchiaro as the *accabadora*. The film's narrative moves geographically between the protagonist's, Annetta's, rural village and urban Cagliari, and temporally between the present, the Second World War, and Annetta's childhood past which takes the forms of memories or dreams. In her ancestral Sardinian world, Annetta we learn, is destined to carry on the communal role passed down through her mother. Her relationship to the role is problematic and, as she confesses to Tecla, it is «a pit I have been buried in since I was a child», yet as a female she accepts her caregiving role, carrying it out with a sense of duty and care. At the same time the role has left her alone and on the margins of society, unable to establish any meaningful emotional relationships with the living. Her marginal position is reflected throughout the film, framed as a lone figure inhabiting a larger landscape, often divided between earth and sky, as in the tradition of landscape with figure paintings, where the human element locates the figure within that landscape. Annetta is often seen either traversing the landscape, either walking across the fields of the Sardinia countryside or amid the rubble in the bombed city or as a lone inhabitant of a dark villa where she has been granted refuge in wartime Cagliari. As Pau states in the Director's Notes to the film, the relationship between human bodies and the places that are home to them is central to his idea of cinema; the human form has no meaning without a solid and essential relationship to the landscape.

In the course of the film, mirrors and sleep sequences are frequently used as

⁷ Texts that discuss the figure of the *accabadora* include A. Bucarelli, C. Lubrano, *Eutanasia ante litteram in Sardegna. Sa femmina accabbadòra. Usi, costumi e tradizioni attorno alla morte in Sardegna*, Cagliari, Scuola Sarda, 2003; I. Bussa, *L'accabadora immaginaria. Una rottamazione del mito*, Edizione Della Torre, 2015, P. G. Pala, *Antologia della Femina Agabbadòra - tutto sulla Femina Agabbadòra*, Luras, Museo Etnografico Galluras, 2010; D. Turchi, *Ho visto agire S'Accabadora*, Oliena, Iris, 2008.

looking glasses into the past, which allow the viewer to piece together the story of Annetta. The metaphorical darkness that has been a presence in Annetta's life since childhood comes back to us in recurring flashbacks and dreams of her first assisted death, that of a young boy afflicted by an incurable childhood illness as well as instances of subsequent performances of her duties. As a young girl, Annetta accepted her role in the same gendered way women are resigned to accepting the roles that society assigns them as mother, wife, daughter. Close-ups reveal facial expressions that vacillate between stoicism and despair, despite the fact that when left in a room alone with the dying soul, her actions and gestures are those of a comforting mother. Her whispers and caresses are meant to reassure the afflicted bodies before they are escorted out of the world.

Central to the film and to Annetta's transformation is Annetta's relationship to her niece Tecla, a conflicted relationship based on both the desire to love and care for her orphaned niece and on maintaining the promise to her sister on her deathbed to break the matrilineal *accabadora* chain. Honoring her sister's wishes, Annetta initially does not take Tecla in after her sister's death but sends her away in order to create a distance and protect her from being made aware of her profession. However, Annetta is unable to negate what seems a genuine instinctual maternal love for her niece and ultimately welcomes her in when the young girl appears at her door. The film unfolds the ensuing tense relationship between Annetta and her niece, mostly through images and gestures of Annetta's anguish and Tecla's anger and inability to understand Annetta's distance. Tecla's subsequent discovery of Annetta's vocation leads to her rejection of her aunt, and her move to Cagliari.

It is Tecla's choices, revealed in retrospective, that prompts Annetta's mobility at the beginning of the film from her rural hometown to a bombed-out Cagliari. Annetta's movement runs counter to the historical movement recorded at the time when many residents of Cagliari were fleeing the city under the wartime bombings. In fact, Annetta finds refuge and a provisional home in the large villa of a wealthy family who have fled Cagliari. In the city, Annetta first searches and temporarily finds her niece, and then awaits as Tecla, victim herself of a bombing in the brothel where she worked is positioned between life and death. In this suspended time and space, Annetta makes important new encounters, including one with a modern passionate urban woman, Alba, a young artist who is also among the few who remained in the city, and Albert, the young Irish Sardinian doctor, who works tirelessly to save the many injured by the war. Tecla, seriously injured and in a coma, becomes yet another of his many patients, victims of the violence of war. Death pervades the film, alternating between the merciful ritualistic deaths brought about by Annetta in her past, and the many senseless deaths brought about by man made technology. These impersonal deaths become personalized in the accounts of

the death of the doctor's mother, a victim of the bombings, and in the news of the death of the son of the elderly woman whose villa is providing shelter for Annetta, the son who is also Alba's ex-lover.

The omnipresence of death in war and of personal loss prefigures Tecla's death. Annetta receives "the call of the *accabadora*" and goes to Tecla's bedside. Having momentarily emerged from her coma, a suffering Tecla asks that Annetta perform the ritual she had on her mother. Annetta begins the ritualistic motions of the angel of mercy but struggles to execute the final act. Albert, the doctor, intervenes and assumes her role. He escorts her out of the room, closes the door and prepares a needle, completing with the aid of modern medicine the action that Annetta could not carry out, a modern day *accabadora*, like the figure of Miele, protagonist of the second film discussed in this essay.

By failing to put an end to Tecla's suffering, Annetta renounces her role as *accabadora*, and at the same time, the film gestures a turn away from death, in an attempt to find a pathway toward life as it literally emerges from the rubble. New birth is prefigured even in the name of Alba, or dawn, the artist who has pieced together the statue of the city's patron saint, Saint Efsio, in time for the annual procession. Through the merging of fictional and found footage shot by Marino Cao, the film proposes rebirth as it further cites the power of film to preserve life, to bear witness 'and to pass on the love for the city and its inhabitants'. A final landscape shot features Annetta, looking out over the city of Cagliari (an image which cannot but remind us of the final shot of Rossellini's *Rome Open City*), she then becomes a blurred image in a film within a film, looking into the doctor's camera, as she moves out of a static, marginalized ritualistic past into a new and uncertain future.

3. *Miele*

Miele or honey is the appropriate "professional" name, taken on by Irene (Jasmine Trinca), in assisting those who are terminally ill through a "sweetened" death.⁸ Unlike Annetta, Miele has not inherited her role from her mother but has chosen it as a profitable career. The choice however is not unrelated to her personal history, as the film reveals through flashbacks that her own mother had died suffering from a prolonged, debilitating disease. Miele works in the shadows of legitimate medical practice: she has never finished medical school but has sufficient medical training to prepare the lethal dosages of the drug to be administered to her patients. Miele like Annetta is invisible; she lives on the margins and leads a nomadic lifestyle.

⁸ In M. Covacich, *A nome tuo*, Torino, Einaudi, 2011, the book, from which the film is loosely adapted, Miele's name is Angela, an appropriate name for the angel of mercy figure she represents.

She is a modern woman who traverses geographical boundaries with ease as she travels from Italy to Mexico via the United States in order to acquire the lethal substance. Based in Rome, she criss-crosses the country to assist people in different cities and keeps her true profession a secret from her friends, family, and lovers. A covert network provides her access to the names of people she does not know who request her assistance. As a professional caregiver, she enters their homes and lives, establishes a provisional relationship with them, explains the process to them, assures them of its painlessness, offers ample opportunity for them to back out of their decisions and then assists and comforts the family member who will help facilitate the death of the suffering loved one. An androgynous looking figure, whose professional attire consists of a button-down shirt, slacks and surgical gloves, Miele is precise and methodical. She prepares the lethal cocktail to be accompanied by a final sweet, or drink and arranges the music; unlike the *accabadora*, Miele does not physically perform the act, nor is she present with the relative or friend at the bedside in the final moments. Before the moment of death which is never shown on screen, Miele usually appears in a long shot on the margins or indeed outside the room. Her expression and behaviour are typically stoic, as she is ideologically convinced that what she does is in her own words «necessary and important».

Yet as in *L'accabadora*, the fact that Miele has not reconciled herself completely to the role permeates the film from the start. This relationship of unease is visually constructed in the film in the contrast drawn between Miele and Irene. The instances of assisted death situated in claustrophobic, sterile, static interiors and performed by a controlled Miele are counterbalanced by moments in sundrenched external spaces or in scenes exuding excessive mobility and activity: Irene's vigorous ocean swims, bike rides across the city, passionate love making, and the occasional panic attack. She emanates life in what seems to be an extreme reaction to her occupation closely tied to death. As the film progresses, however, Miele's stoicism seems to move increasingly to displays of empathy and emotion, particularly in the scene of the prolonged dying moments of a young, disabled man where a close-up of Miele reveals an affected pained expression. Miele's overtly emotional reaction reveals the blurred boundary of her professional code that allows her to assist the terminally ill but becomes problematic when it comes to aiding those for whom disability severely impacts quality of life.

In fact, it is the episode involving Professor Grimaldi that becomes central to the film as it stages the thorny debate on the right to die as a fundamental human right. While Miele's other patients, a bedridden woman suffering from terminal cancer, a man whose lesions define him as a victim of AIDS, suffer from ailments

that sit within the boundaries of terminal illness and so within the ethical professional rules by which she abides, Grimaldi's case strays from the "ethics" and politics of care practiced by her network. Miele provides assistance to those who have been identified as being terminally ill and is adamant about refusing such "care" to a man who claims to be in perfect health but wants to exercise his right to die. Grimaldi, having lived a full life, finds himself occupying a world that no longer makes sense to him, a world of reality shows and 'where contemporary idiosyncrasy knows no limits' and has decided that he is ready for the final exit, one which he wants to undertake quietly and not ostentatiously by jumping out a window.

The encounter with Grimaldi also results in Miele's most serious professional error. We are made aware of other small slip-ups that Miele makes and that disturb her, slips that diverge from her code of practice, such as the use of certain prohibited words with patients that are insensitive in their pointing to a future which they will not inhabit. In the case of Grimaldi, she makes a major blunder which seriously transgresses her code of ethics; she provides him with the lethal drug having erroneously assumed he is terminally ill. The ensuing episodes of the film are motivated by Miele's obsession to retrieve the drug, something that Grimaldi resists. While Grimaldi's desire to end his life seems to challenge the strict code Miele adheres to, his questions disarm her and her adherence to her ideology begins to unravel.

While staunchly refusing to carry out the task for which she had been hired, Irene does not abandon Grimaldi. Seeking out his company, she transforms from Miele to Irene, from a care-giving practitioner to a companion, her care for him takes the form of affection more akin to friendship as they engage in intimate conversations and wander across a contemporary Rome marked by its static contemporary inhabitants who run and cycle in place. On a narrative level, it is through her relationship with Grimaldi that the viewer gains access to Irene's past, her mother's death (which had been alluded to in photographs, dreams and flashbacks) and her background as a medical school dropout. Conversations with Grimaldi provide additional space for insights, particularly for the viewer's benefit and reflection, on the debates about who should have the right to choose to die and the definition of life itself. Irene reflects on death in her conversation with Grimaldi: «Nobody really wants to die, none of the people I have assisted in these three years wanted to kill themselves. They want to live, they all want to live. But they can no longer call it life, they can't take it anymore». Unwittingly, Irene's pronouncement holds true for Grimaldi himself. While Grimaldi views Irene's work as transactional – an activity she carries out primarily for mercenary ends, she denies it, stubbornly maintaining that her caregiving role is tied to assisting those who are

terminally ill. The debate between Irene and Grimaldi is not resolved, nor does the film judge either position. However, it is narratively clear that ultimately, just like Miele who abiding by her strict professional code cannot agree with Grimaldi's right to die and will not facilitate it, Irene cannot rescue him from 'that very life that he can't take anymore'.

The Irene-Grimaldi relationship and the debates it instigates explain Golino's deliberate choice to diverge from the novel in her depiction of the Miele/Angela-Grimaldi relationship. While the film is faithful to *A nome tuo* in many of its narrative threads and in particular in the construction of Angela/Miele as a disciplined professional, the relationship with Grimaldi takes on a very different dynamic. In the book Angela meets Grimaldi, talks to him, learns that he wants to kill himself though he is not sick, and so, following her ethical code, she does not give him the lethal drug. Angela is in a position of power, she has what he wants, and he pursues her in order to obtain it, and meanwhile she falls in love with him. When she discovers that he is not interested in her but only in the drug, she gives it to him and leaves. Grimaldi disappears from the text and as readers we are never provided with narrative closure. The first-person narrator only reveals that she does not know what ever happened to Grimaldi. In Golino's film, the power dynamic is reversed as Miele pursues him, initially to retrieve the drug she had mistakenly given him, but, along the way, she develops a friendship and fondness for him. In the last scene in which we see Grimaldi, he goes to her beachside house and returns the drug to her, not because her friendship has saved him, but because he does not want to implicate her in his suicide. The subsequent scene reveals that Grimaldi has taken his life in that more ostentatious way he would have preferred to avoid.

On a narrative level, Grimaldi's exiting the scene provides Irene with the impetus to redefine her life. She abandons her care-giving profession whose boundaries and rules have become unclear to her. In an open ending, we find Irene having embarked on another transnational journey, this time not in search of illicit drugs but to test a legend related to the dome of an Istanbul mosque recounted to her by Grimaldi, a legend itself situated in the dubious space between, science and the inexplicable miracles of life. Irene waits and watches to see if the pieces of paper she places on the ground beneath the center of the dome will magically rise to the top. When this does not seem to occur, she turns away, resigned, until children's laughter causes her to turn her head and witness the 'miracle' come true, she then turns to the camera and faces us with a big toothy smile on her face.

4. Conclusion

L'accabadora and *Miele* in their unique ways contribute to a growing corpus of films addressing the debates around euthanasia and assisted suicide by bringing the spectator into the conflicted world of the administrator of this act. On the one hand, the films bring us in intimate contact with the women carrying out their role based on duty of care and compassion. On the other hand, the films as narratives of transformation extend beyond their thematic origins and provide space for reflection on the meaning of life as a whole: on the senseless nature of war and its unnecessary death in *L'accabadora* and on the emptiness of post-humanist existence in *Miele*. The films' protagonists, two motherless daughters, who have inherited the need to alleviate suffering directly or indirectly from their now absent mothers, carry out an obligation that has at the same time left them alienated and marginalized from life. Important relationships bring them to bridge what appears to be the incompatibility of last mothering and living. While duty-bound but also emotionally worn down by the roles they carry out on the border of life and death as they adhere to the rules of the game, key encounters and experiences enable them to break out of the stasis and repression to which the role relegates them. If as angels of mercy they had the capacity to *deterritorialize* (to use a Deleuzian and later Braidotti term borrowed from theoretical notions of nomadism), to undo and live outside of a system, they are subsequently able to break out of the stasis and repression to which that very system relegates them. In the ending of *L'accabadora*, Annetta seems to find a place for herself outside of the rituals of a closed traditional community that confines and marginalizes her, in a modern city emerging from the ashes of war. Annetta is not unlike the statue of St. Eufisio that has been crushed then tenderly recomposed and paraded through the streets of city, hence emerging from the rumble. For Irene the encounter with Grimaldi, who made her rethink her ideologically staunch position, leads her to explore other ways of being, as she crosses new boundaries, leaving behind familiar landscapes and a life of secrets and lies. Ultimately as female narratives of development the films allow their female protagonists to break that maternal chain which dictates a sacrificial duty of care. Not necessarily opting for closure however, uncertainty and vagueness abound in the films endings which leave the women open to reassessing the border they had found themselves constantly negotiating, that tenuous border between life and death.